# HOLIDAY BOOK GUIDE

# The Holidays Are an Open Book

*AT ANY TIME of the year it is possible to find books that—in their visual audacity, exotic display and immodest price—defy the normal rules of book buying. Prudence requires a covetous riffling-through and no more. But surely one point of the holidays is to throw off such cautious habit, to reach beyond the prissy and manageable, to indulge in the magnificence of otherwise forbidden books—if only for the sake of finding a gift for a friend. In exactly this generous spirit, our in-house critics have perused the gift books in various categories and chosen a few of the notable ones. More than a few, actually.*

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## *Photography*

By TUNKU VARADARAJAN

**ONCE UPON A TIME,** portrait photography was regarded as a source of cultural doom. Baudelaire, for instance, reacting to early daguerreotypes, gnashed his dentures thus: "Our squalid society rushed, Narcissus to a man, to gaze at its trivial image on a scrap of metal."

We remain Narcissuses to a man, but—marvelous to relate—our images are not always trivial.

Latter-day Baudelaires need only look at **"Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints"** (Powerhouse, 240 pages, $60) to be cured of their sourness. I confess that I did not know the photographer, Mike Disfarmer (1884-1959) and so approached his work with no baggage of preconception. I was bewitched. Disfarmer was a studio photographer in Heber Springs, Ark., from 1917 to 1956, and his work brings to life not merely a range of modest people who posed for him but also a defunct, sepia era, when small towns such as Heber Springs were their own private specks-on-the-man.

Unlike the exhaustively celebrated portraits brought together in **"Richard Avedon: In the American West"** (Abrams, 184 pages, $75)—which were commissioned for a museum exhibition and so bear the stamp of a premeditated artistic mission—Disfarmer's pictures were intended as commercial transactions, for sale to the subjects who posed for him. Yet they cede nothing to Avedon's in their excellence of eye and composition and are undoubtedly more authentic as American documentary.

On his photographic road trip through the American West in the 1980s, Avedon strove mightily—and successfully—for effect, seeking for ways to disconcert his audience. Hence his pictures of drifters and soot-smeared coalminers, his tattooed riffraff and his flashes of ghoulish humor. Who can forget Ronald Fischer, the beekeeper, who has a hive-full of insects crawling all over his bare body?

Disfarmer, by contrast, had more than just a chance encounter with his subjects, or a choreographed one. He saw them, presumably, in everyday settings—at the drug store, the bar, the diner. This quotidian contact ensured that he brought simplicity, humility and diplomacy to his undoubted technical ability with a camera. The result is a series of graceful portraits, always respectful of the Little People depicted—much in the manner, say, of Seydou Keita, the Malian photographer whose lifetime's work in small-town Africa has been rightly fêted in recent years.

None of the pictures in the Disfarmer book has a caption; each was painstakingly retrieved from private albums and households in the area where he worked. One is left—somewhat pleasurably—to imagine who these people were. Is there a Sapphic quality to the three girls (one rather dishy) who pose, bodies pressed together, on page 65? How on earth did that pleasant-looking fellow on page 94 end up with such a frumpy wife? Was the languid couple on page 179—he well-fed, she well-groomed—the happiest in Heber Springs? Or did they cheat on each other and smile merely for Disfarmer's lens?